

Roswell Daily Record – April 25, 2010

By Congressman Harry Teague

Too often our nation takes for granted a group of Americans who have made great sacrifices for our country—our veterans. America's veterans fought for the freedoms we enjoy today and I believe that in return, we must honor our commitment to provide them and their families the support they earned and deserve.

Since my election Congress I have made it a top priority to stay in touch with local veterans and to be responsive to the issues that matter most to them and their communities. As the representative from New Mexico's 2

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Congressional District, I am honored to represent the largest percentage of our state's veterans and it was for them that I fought hard to get a seat on the House Veterans Affairs Committee (HVAC).

I take my position on the HVAC and on both the Economic Opportunity and Health Subcommittees seriously and I have worked hard to be an advocate for veterans.

While we still have a lot of work to do, over the past year, we've made a lot of changes that will improve the lives of our veterans and ensure that they and their families get the care and support they need. We took on tough issues that some were not ready to talk about and others thought would never get done.

One of those issues was the mental health of our troops and veterans. I was proud to author the Kyle Barthel Veterans and Service Members Mental Health Screening Act.

I named this bill after one of my constituents.

Kyle was a veteran who tragically took his own life after not receiving the care he needed to cope with PTSD.

When I heard Kyle's story, I couldn't help but think that in so many ways we as a nation and a government had failed Kyle.

I made a promise to Kyle's mother and to myself that I was going to do something about this.

So we went to work on a bill in his honor, but to help all our troops and veterans.

My bill called for confidential mental health screenings for veterans so that we can begin to treat the unseen wounds of war and reduce the number of veteran suicides.

Thankfully, we were able to get mental health language added to the National Defense Authorization Act and signed into law.

But that's not the only issue we've seen progress on. During my travels across the district, I heard from veterans in all corners of the district who were forced to rely on their family, friends or other veterans to drive them to medical appointments that are oftentimes three or four hours away from their homes. And I heard from family members who often have to travel with their loved ones to the VA hospital hundreds of miles away knowing that they cannot afford to stay in a hotel room if an appointment runs late or an examination takes too long.

So, we got to work on a bill to address this issue.

I am proud to say that my bill was included in a package of bills that passed last week and is one step closer to becoming law.

When this bill is signed into law it will help cover the travel-related expenses that roughly 56,000 New Mexico Veterans face in accessing care.

Veterans' unemployment is another issue we've been working to tackle. It was recently announced that veterans' unemployment has been increasing at a staggering rate among recently returned veterans.

I knew we needed to do something to help address this at home so I introduced the Energy Jobs for Vets Act which passed the House last month.

This bill incentivizes the hiring of veterans and provides on-the-job training of veterans for jobs in the energy sector.

Southeastern New Mexico is at the forefront of our national energy economy and, if passed into law, this bill will benefit both our energy industry and our vets.

In addition to my legislative work on behalf of veterans, I have worked hard to give veterans a voice in the 2nd Congressional District. Just last month, I hosted a Veterans Affairs Health Subcommittee hearing in Las Cruces so that New Mexican veterans could attend the hearing and make the committee members aware of the unique concerns facing veterans here in the Second District.

In February, I hosted U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki at a veteran's roundtable in Alamogordo so Shinseki could hear directly from New Mexico's veterans about issues they have with the VA. These events gave vets in my district a chance to speak directly to the leaders from the VA about their needs and issues without being filtered or censored.

I have also brought veterans themselves in to the decision making process. Through the Wounded Warrior program, I have hired a veteran right here in my Roswell office to help veterans with any issues they may be facing.

Veterans from the Second district are encouraged to contact him, or anyone in my district offices, for assistance with the VA or any other veterans' related issues.

Another way I stay in touch with local veterans is through my Veterans Advisory Council. I often turn to this non-partisan group of veterans from all corners of the Second District to gather their input on veterans issues and look to this group for their ideas as to how to improve veterans services.

I frequently ask my Advisory Council for suggestions on what issues need to be raised in hearings and what legislation needs to be addressed in Congress.

Veterans that wish to contribute to this group are welcome to contact my office for details.

Just like they stood up and fought for us and defended our rights and liberties, our veterans deserve someone who stands up and fights for the benefits they earned and deserve. I am proud of my record as an advocate for New Mexico's veterans and I intend to continue to fighting to improve the system and services available to all of our nation's veterans.

I encourage every veteran who needs assistance with the VA or any federal agency to contact my Roswell office at 575-622-4178.